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Folk into Art: John Fahey, Modernism and the American Folk Revival

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ABSTRACT

John Fahey's music holds a distinct place in the mid-century folk revival--distinct because he is difficult to fit in with traditional narratives of the revival. John Fahey created a unique musical style through incorporation of traditional American music with classical music forms. His musical "quotations" and renditions of American blues, folk, ragtime, Protestant hymns, and parlor songs did not merely revive traditional music, but gave it new form and newfound respect in order to further artistic exploration. Fahey was a musical modernist, infusing tradition with the new. Fahey's work can be situated in the context of modernist/folk connections that began earlier in the century.

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I wish to express my appreciation to Professor Charles McGovern, under whose guidance this investigation was conducted, for his patience, guidance and criticism throughout the investigation.

"This is Blind Thomas, playin' blues..."[1] He bangs out chords, slide-guitar style, that could only have been born of the Mississippi Delta, clearly in the school of Charley Patton. Was Blind Thomas another blind blues legend of the Paramount or Okeh labels? No--this recording was made for the 78 rpm record label Fonotone--in 1959. Blind Thomas was John Fahey, a 20-year-old white kid from the Washington, D.C. suburb of Takoma Park, Maryland. "Blind Blues" was recorded in the basement of 78 record collector and Fonotone owner Joe Bussard. At a time when 45s and LPs had decidedly taken over the market, dedicated and likeminded fans of primarily pre-war hillbilly music found their way to Joe Bussard's basement in Frederick, Maryland to pay reverence to the rare sides in Bussard's already renowned collection and to play and record their own recreations of this music. Bussard listed Fahey's recordings as "authentic Negro folk music" in his mail-order catalog.[2] Fahey and Bussard's posturing was an attempt to disrupt the idea of authenticity and racialized music, as well as a way to claim a place for themselves in the genealogy of the blues. Moreover, this imitation was homage. The first blues record Fahey ever heard was Blind Willie Johnson's "Praise God I'm Satisfied:" "The song by Blind Willie kept coming back into my head. I couldn't get it out, and it sounded like the most beautiful thing I

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[1] Blind Thomas, "Blind Blues," by John Fahey, recorded November 15, 1959 on *Fonotone Records: Frederick, Maryland*, Dust-to-Digital 3, compact disc.

[2] John Fahey, *Your Past Comes Back to Haunt You: The Fonotone Years [1958-1965].* Dust-to-Digital 21, 2011, 5 compact discs, liner notes, 76.

had ever heard. And I started to cry. So then I got interested in the blues and I learned to pick off old records, mostly black artists, and a few white players."[3]

Fahey's work holds a distinct place in the mid-century folk revival because he fits uneasily into traditional narratives of the revival. Scholars typically see the mid-century folk revival as a counterpart to political changes of the time, inseparable from and integral to the New Left and the Civil Rights movement. But folk revivalism was also an artistic movement. John Fahey created a unique musical style through incorporation of traditional American music with classical music forms. His musical "quotations" and renditions of American blues, folk, ragtime, Protestant hymns, and parlor songs did not merely revive traditional music, but gave it new form and newfound respect in order to further artistic exploration. Fahey was a musical modernist, infusing tradition with the new. Fahey's work can be situated in the context of modernist/folk connections that began earlier in the century.

Section I: In Search of the Authentic: Modernism and "Folk"

The histories of modernism and folk revivalism were intertwined, and John Fahey's career is a prime example of these debates, as Fahey simultaneously participated in the folk revival while distancing himself from it. Political progressives saw folk music as a vehicle for change, while folklorists and collectors valued its aesthetic qualities and thought that politicizing art undermined it. Folklorist Richard Dorson said,

[3] John Fahey, *Of Rivers and Religion*, [Reprise LP MS 2089 (stereo), 1972], liner notes.

> I would certainly not agree that the scholar serves humanity by tying in his scholarship and his research with social causes. I think he functions in one realm as a scholar and he function in another realm as a citizen. When you begin to mix these two, you debase the coin of scholarship.[4]

While scholars have recognized the tension between the aesthetics and politics of the folk revival, that recognition has seldom been analyzed and the revival as an artistic movement has not been fully explored. In *Rainbow Quest*, Ronald Cohen alludes to the "...debates over folk music's aesthetic versus political roots and dimensions, the values and motivations of the young, and authenticity versus commercialism."[5] He highlights a debate between Susan Montgomery, writing for *Mademoiselle* and Gene Bluestein, writing for the *New Republic*. Montgomery discussed the folk revival as primarily youth social rebellion—the search for authenticity in a commercial world. Bluestein criticized the article for neglecting folk music's radical legacy. This tension is at the heart of any analysis of the folk revival. Individuals had different reasons for being drawn to folk music and it's culture. Both Montgomery and Bluestein's views are valid and are in line with Robert Cantwell's argument in *When We Were Good*. The radical roots of the folk revival are impossible to ignore, but Cantwell finds the greatest significance of the folk revival as the personal quest of 1960s youth to connect with something more authentic.

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[4] Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 179.

[5] Ronald Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival & American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 168.

Benjamin Filene's *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* and Mary Beth Hamilton's *In Search of the Blues* both explore the construction of the folk and blues canon. Both focus on those Filene calls "middlemen"—figures like John and Alan Lomax who discovered folk musicians and presented them to the public.[6] These "middlemen" thus shaped the public's idea of authenticity. Hamilton similarly argues that the "blues" is a construction of record collectors and scholars. These types of studies are significant because they remind us that any notion we have of the past is constructed through the lens of those with the power and authority to choose what to include and exclude in the canon or archive of any particular subject. Rather than rehashing that argument, I am interested in exploring the aesthetic element that drove the revival and its connection to Modernism, specifically through John Fahey's work. His work defies categorization in traditional narratives of the revival.

The relationship between modernism and the "folk" aesthetic has been well-established in classical music and art history scholarship, but these fields are defined by and extend from the perspective of the art establishment. Antonín Dvořák's compositions were inspired by Bohemian folk music. His influence spread to American composers while director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York from 1892 to 1895. He encouraged American composers to borrow from their country's rich folk music and wrote his symphony *From the New World* as an example, inspired by Native American and African American

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[6] Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 6.

music.[7] Successive composers followed his lead--Charles Ives, Aaron Copland, Igor Stravinsky, and George Gershwin incorporated folk music into composition. But in the process, the "folk" element was subsumed by the larger conventions of classical music form. What we see in John Fahey is a reversal in perspective—a folk artist that incorporated modernist classical elements into folk music.

The formation of interest in what we recognize today as American folk art came from the same modernist and nationalist impulse to define a native artistic tradition.[8] Art dealer Edith Halpert and curator Holger Cahill gave American folk art significance by portraying it as the ancestor of modern American art.[9] In the late 1920s, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller collected artifacts and paintings by unschooled artists as a counterpart to her support of modernist painters and the newly-established Museum of Modern Art, locating a similarity in their respective uses of abstraction, simple forms, and the evocation of feeling. Her collection created the canon of American folk art, but its content and framework came from the modernist art establishment. The Rockefeller family ushered the United States into the industrial age and in turn spent large amounts of money to justify

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[7] Gene Krupa and Leonard Bernstein, "Has Jazz Influenced the Symphony?" *Modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources*, edited by Daniel Albright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 401.

[8] Virginia Tuttle Clayton, "Picturing a 'Usable Past,'" in *Drawing on America's Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design* by Virginia Tuttle Clayton, Elizabeth Stillinger, Erika Doss, and Deborah Chotner. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 19-20; Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 9-12.

[9] Ibid., 23.

their efforts and preserve that which they were helping to destroy. The Rockefellers funded the restoration of Williamsburg, Virginia to its imagined eighteenth-century appearance with preindustrial crafts. Henry Ford similarly created a picture of America's past in the establishment of an idealized pre-industrial village just miles away from the River Rogue Plant.[10]

A perennial question in defining "folk" art has always been designating who qualified as "folk." Enlightenment philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder idealized the lower class of Germany and believed that the true *Volk* were artless peasants. Even in the early modern era, scholars feared that globalization threatened the purity of native cultures.[11] English folk song collector Cecil Sharp traveled to Appalachia in the late 1910s to attempt to reconstruct his conception of England's folk song heritage.[12] In the 1930s, John and Alan Lomax traveled to prisons in hopes of finding blacks with folk songs uninfluenced by modern media. Fahey played with the idea of authenticity and had an ambivalent relationship to folk music throughout this career, usually trying to distance himself from that label. He at times identified himself as a folk musician since he taught himself to play the guitar in the style of "authentic" folk/blues artists. Throughout his career, he claimed to be unable to read music. In fact, Fahey had Al Wilson of Canned Heat do the transcriptions for his 1967 M.A. thesis on Charley Patton.[13] Fahey's

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[10] Ibid., 69.

[11] Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 9-11.

[12] Ibid., 22-23.

[13] Edwin Pouncey, "Blood on the Frets," *The Wire*, August 1998.

friend Nancy McLean claimed that in the late 1950s, Fahey required help to tune his guitars.[14] Even though Fahey claimed to be self-taught, he was a relatively privileged middle-class suburbian whose parents both played piano. He reflected on this irony in the liner notes to *Let Go* (1984):

> Producer Robb spoke, "No folk music on this record--not even anything that sounds or suggests folk music. People think you play folk music."
>
> "I know," said I.
>
> "Bunch of Airheads."
>
> "Yeah. And the people in the Volk Societies won't hire me because they say *I don't* play Volksmuzik. They even tear down my posters when I play in town with a Volk Society."
>
> "Bunch of Commie Fascist Airheads."
>
> "Yeah. It's hard to break out of a bag I never intended to be in--never thought I *was* in. I mean I've got an MA in folklore from UCLA. I know what Volksmuzik is. I'm not a Volk. I'm from the suburbs."
>
> "You can't win."[15]

Fahey studied philosophy at American University, and he referenced this background throughout his career.[16] His use of the term "Volk" here and elsewhere invoked German nationalism going back to Herder. Fahey

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[14] Steve Lowenthal, *Dance of Death: The Life of John Fahey, American Guitarist*, (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 13.

[15] John Fahey, *Let Go*, Varrick Records 008, 1984, liner notes.

[16] John Fahey, *Your Past Comes Back to Haunt You*, liner notes, 35.

demonstrated his complex relationship with the "folk"--a simultaneous identification with folk culture, but at the same time recognizing his inability to be "authentic." Fahey consciously academicized his work and moved his body of work into the realm of concert music. In the process, he simultaneously subverted the establishment and tradition. Fahey was at once a preservationist, nostalgic, revivalist, and innovator, but musically difficult to categorize.

Some of the terms in this thesis necessarily have fluid definitions, such as "Modernist," "classical," "folk." These terms are, more than anything, tools to help contextualize Fahey's work and not an attempt at hard and fast categorizations. Part of what makes compelling artistic expression is the difficulty in defining and labeling it. Fahey, an academic himself, was one to employ categorizations and create new ones, but did not take them seriously enough to avoid mocking them occasionally. Terms like these, after all, are simply a way to sort through culture and try to make some sense of it. Daniel Albright characterizes modernism as a

> ...search for authenticity—a search that sometimes finds authenticity in strange places, such as the microtonal intervals of peasant fiddlers, or in the noise of an airplane propeller, or the principle of equal value to each note in the chromatic scale. Indeed each of the subordinate isms of Modernism, such as Primitivism, Exoticism, Futurism, and Serialism, can be understood as an investigation of a certain locus of authenticity, a refuge from the exhaustion of the tonal system, a revivification of the art.[17]

[17] Daniel Albright. "Introduction," *Modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources*, edited by Daniel Albright, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 17-18.

I argue that we should consider Fahey's work specifically as part of a larger Modernist cultural movement. Modernism, and Post-modernism for that matter, do not have set-in-stone start and end dates, nor are they easily defined as cultural movements. But arts transcend time, as do cultural movements. There are two specific aspects of Modernism that are pertinent to the discussion of Fahey's work, namely Modernism's relationship to the past and its experimental quality. Folk revivalism is closely associated with Modernism because of the Modernist impulse to preserve that which modern society replaces. Collecting and organizing relics of the past is a characteristic of Modernism. J. M. Mancini called it "anthological modernism," a distinctly American type of modernism, or more broadly, the "development of technologies for the containment of authenticity."[18] This is a form of salvage ethnography, what Brian Hochman defines as the sense of "duty of the civilized to record primitive life in the face of its certain demise."[19] Although there is an element of self-righteousness as well as guilt to salvage ethnography, Hochman also admitted that this documentation aids in cultural reclamation and adaptation.[20] One element of the obsessive collector mindset has to do with the need to tell a story before it is lost. Amanda

[18] J. M. Mancini, "'Messin' with the Furniture Man'": Early Country Music, Regional Culture, and the Search for an Anthological Modernism," *American Literary History* 16.2 (2004): 223.

[19] Brian Hochman, *Savage Preservation: The Ethnographic Origins of Modern Media Technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), xiii.

[20] Ibid., 180, 182

Petrusich wrote in *Do Not Sell at Any Price* that this sense is "not an unfamiliar feeling for most 78 collectors."[21]

Modernism often defines itself by its relationship with the past. As Judith Tick wrote in her biography of modernist composer and folklorist Ruth Crawford Seeger: "Just as modernism flouted conventional practice, so did tradition. Just as modernism rejected Romantic excess, so did tradition."[22] Seeger used works from the past to inform her contemporary works. Tick also discussed the role of opposition in the modernist perspective, an acceptance of opposing factors and how they can be connected, in this case the old with the new. One of the hallmarks of modernism is the desire, in Ezra Pound's words, to "make it new." T. S. Eliot similarly wrote that

> [tradition] cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense... [T]he historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence... [T]he poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and... continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career.[23]

The modernist artist is aware of the context of his work in relation to that which came before.

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[21] Amanda Petrusich, *Do Not Sell at Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt of the World's Rarest 78 rpm Records* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 137.

[22] Judith Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer's Search for American Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), ix.

[23] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), 4, 6.

A landmark in the folk revival was the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, complied by artist/anthropologist Harry Smith and issued in three volumes in 1952. Fahey wrote in the liner notes to the previously unreleased volume four of the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, "Let me be clear: I would not be recognized as a significant guitar player had it not been for Harry."[24] Smith's *Anthology* was as much a work of Modernist art as it was an act of preservation. Peter Goldsmith called collecting an "artistic endeavor for Smith, because the arrangement of the collected objects followed the dictates of his own idiosyncratic imagination. ... Smith was surely among the first... to directly implicate folk music in an avant-garde artistic vision."[25] Petrusich wrote, "His compulsions were driven by a fierce internal logic; Smith was painstaking in his pursuit of proper serialization..." Smith's archivist and friend Rani Singh said, "He was looking for undercurrents. He was looking for ideas that were disappearing, nuances that were disappearing..."[26] In 2000, Fahey's record label Revenant released Smith's unfinished fourth volume of the *Anthology*. In Fahey's notes to the volume, he revealed his view of the *Anthology* as a history of American society seen through music, culminating in the message of personal alienation in

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[24] Harry Smith, *Harry Smith's Anthology of American Folk Music Volume Four*, Revenant/The Harry Smith Archives RVN 211, 2007, 2 compact discs, liner notes, 84.

[25] Peter D. Goldsmith, *Making People's Music: Moe Asch and Folkways Records* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 239.

[26] Petrusich, *Do Not Sell at Any Price*, 136.

the face of modernity in *Volume 4*.[27] Fahey continued in the spirit of the Anthology in the way that his work tried to make sense of the past.

> Dean Blackwood, who with Fahey co-founded Revenant Records, said, I have this kind of unhealthy fetishistic relation with 78s, but [Fahey] was a collector of the music, not the records. He would tape the ones he liked and trade 'em or sell 'em. He internalized the music and incorporated it into his own work. For years, he didn't have a single 78 in his possession, and when he died he had zero.[28]

The 78s were simply the medium that contained the music, which was what Fahey really cared about. Similarly, Fahey viewed his guitars as mere tools. In a 1969 television interview, he used the sound hole of his Hawaiian guitar as an ashtray, and he was known to generally abuse his guitars.[29] This impersonality and non-identification with the music is a hallmark of modernism. T. S. Eliot wrote:

> The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.[30]

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[27] Smith, *Anthology of American Folk Music Volume Four*, liner notes, 85.

[28] Fahey, *Your Past Comes Back to Haunt You,* liner notes, 76.

[29] *John Fahey in Concert and Interviews.*

[30] Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 11.

The physical objects—records or guitars—were inanimate objects through which the music lived. Fahey and Smith both saw themselves as a medium through which tradition could live on—not through repetition but by giving it new form. Smith and Fahey both saw their work as part of centuries-old traditions. The 1968 re-releases of Fahey's *Blind Joe Death*, *Death Chants*, and *Dance of Death and Other Plantation Favorites* featured artwork by artist Tom Weller, who also created psychedelic posters for San Francisco bands and album art for Country Joe and the Fish. The artwork on all three albums is an adaptation of fifteenth-century woodcut illustrations.[31] The use of Renaissance imagery harkens to Harry Smith's "celestial monochord" on the cover of the *Anthology*. The monochord illustrated mathematical relationships in music and was a symbol of perfect harmony. The reissued cover of *Blind Joe Death*, an illustration "The Children of Venus," was in a similar vein, representing the myth of Venus's children being musically talented and full of merriment.[32] Both Smith and Fahey connected their work to a long tradition of music as mystical and quasi-religious.

Fahey incorporated modernist classical music techniques into his own compositions. He often aligned his own work with the classical world rather than the folk: "I had a big background in listening to classical music. I started trying to compose like I was playing the guitar, but I heard an orchestra in my head. So I was really composing for full orchestra. Of course I didn't know enough chords or

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[31] Claudio Guerrieri, *The John Fahey Handbook Vol. 1*, (Marston Gate: Amazon.co.uk, Ltd, 2013), 162, 226, 255.

[32] Ibid., 162.

harmonies yet, but I came up with some interesting stuff."[33] The term "classical" music in this thesis references art music in the European tradition. Modernist classical music experimented with form, tonality, and other conventions of concert music. Fahey often structured his music like classical pieces in length and form. Barret Hansen classified Fahey's music as "Underground Classical" in *The Little Sandy Review*.[34] He said of Fahey's writing process, "He would start with a traditional pattern and see if he could work something contemporary into it, another chord instead of the usual changes."[35] Fahey said in an interview:

> I was trying to put together some dissonant music—I was thinking mainly of Bartok as a model, but played in this finger-picking pattern, which I still use. So I was trying to put those things together into a coherent musical language which people would understand. And it worked pretty good. Everybody else was just trying to copy folk musicians. I wasn't trying to do that. I was using them as teachers, so to speak, for technique. I was never trying to be a "folk." How could I be a "folk?" I'm from the suburbs, you know?[36]

In the liner notes to *Of Rivers and Religion* (1972), Nat Hentoff quoted Fahey: "Like Segovia, who used the guitar techniques of Spain to make arrangements of

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[33] *John Fahey in Concert and Interviews.*

[34] Barret Hansen. "John Fahey: The Great San Bernardino Birthday Party and Other Excursions," *The Little Sandy Review*, November 1966.

[35] David Fricke, "John Fahey, 1939-2001," *Rolling Stone*, April 12, 2001.

[36] *John Fahey in Concert and Interviews.*

classical compositions by composers like Bach, I use the techniques of the United States and a few I think I invented myself to play my own songs."[37] Throughout Fahey's career, he used terminology from classical music. In the liner notes to *Voice of the Turtle*, Fahey referred to his pieces as tone poems, which in the classical music world refers to music that encourages the listener to picture scenes, ideas, and moods rather than focusing on structure. He described *The Great San Bernardino Birthday Party* as "programmatic," which is a term used in classical music to describe music that is meant to depict something in particular, in this case Fahey's memories of a failed relationship.[38]

The absence of lyrics also immediately separated Fahey's music from commercial folk and popular music. In a 1967 interview, poet Douglas Blazek asked Fahey about his relationship with poetry, referring to his song titles as "pure poetry."[39] Fahey responded that he did not care for poetry, that it bored him. He described himself as more emotional than intellectual, citing that as the reason that he understood and communicated through music so much better. Fahey's six epigraphs to his 1978 guitar tablature book say a lot about his view of song lyrics. The epigraphs are from Slim Gaillard, traditional tunes, and Charley Patton—and include lyrics like "Vout a rini, mac vootie" and "Shool, school, shola manna roo."[40] The common thread throughout the epigraphs is scat singing,

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[37] Fahey, *Of Rivers and Religion*, liner notes.

[38] Fahey, *Your Past Comes Back to Haunt You,* liner notes, 73.

[39] Ibid., 72.

[40] John Fahey, *The Best of John Fahey 1959-1977*, (Saragota, CA: Guitar Player Books, 1978) 3.

nonsense lyrics, and repetition—the message seemingly that the words can be secondary to the feeling. Fahey wrote of Charley Patton:

> ...it seems that to Patton words and even entire stanzas were subservient to the performance as a whole. Entertainers such as Patton 'entertain' by arousing certain emotions or feelings in the listener. Patton was most successful in doing this. But he did not rely on 'rational' texts to do it.[41]

Section II. "How could I be a 'folk?' I'm from the suburbs..."[42]

Fahey worked in a folk style, but fought against genre labels and the idea that he could be considered an "authentic" folk musician. "Folk" refers to traditional culture, the expression of people without formal schooling in the arts. "Primitivism," in the Western art world, generally refers to professional artists that borrow stylistic elements from "folk" artists or from non-Western art.[43] Fahey was not too concerned about categorizing his music, but a term he used in the mostly nonsensical liner notes to *Voice of the Turtle*—"American primitive"—stuck. The overall tone of these liner notes was mockingly quasi-academic and convoluted—the reference in the liner notes was to Fahey's "many American primitive guitar tone-poems." The term was used in reviews and press releases

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[41] John Fahey, *Charley Patton*, (1970) 2001, Facsimile of first edition, included in *"Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues:" The Worlds of Charley Patton*, Revenant 212, 2001, 7 compact discs, 59.

[42] *John Fahey in Concert and Interviews.*

[43] Albright, 235-236.

and subsequently became inseparable from Fahey's name. In 1969, when asked about the categorization, Fahey replied: "Primitive means untaught. I didn't have any teachers... If I had to call it anything I'd call it that. I wouldn't worry about calling it anything"[44] The past was not something to be merely "revived," but was an archive of evocative sounds, styles, and feelings to be given new form. Béla Bartók believed that Stravinsky "transmuted" folk music into modern music by referencing and imitating the original melodies. It is "modern" because it is the expression of the artists' combined musical experience.[45] Charles Ives similarly believed that musical expression came from the individual's memories of music experienced. He and other composers, such as Virgil Thomson, identified the openness to various source material as a characteristic of the American artist. Ruth Crawford Seeger's work transcribing folk songs informed her orchestral compositions. Aaron Copland once identified "a certain songfulness" as a characteristic of American music.[46] Ives emphasized music as the expression of individual experience, echoing the sentiment of Emerson and the Transcendentalists in the previous century, specifically invoking Thoreau in his *Essays before a Sonata.*[47] But it is the conflict between individual "original" expression and what Harold Bloom called the "anxiety of influence" that makes

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[44] Ibid.

[45] Béla Bartók, "The Influence of Peasant Music on Modern Music," *Modernism and Music*, 247.

[46] Howard Pollack, *Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man* (Chicago: University if Illinois Press, 2000), 530.

[47] Albright, *Modernism and Music*, 156-157.

Fahey's approach particularly modernist. Fahey experienced the modernist dilemma, as Brian Jones put it, of how to "explore individual expression without severing one's self from the wellspring of artistic tradition."[48] Primitivism, as an artistic movement, simultaneously pays tribute to the past and creates something new.

Throughout his career, Fahey questioned and played with the idea of authenticity in the folk revival. His guise as Blind Thomas on Fonotone records playfully attempted to trick listeners into thinking they were listening to a black blues man, referencing the sometimes ambiguous racial identity of recording artists in the pre-war era. In contrast to the mainstream commercial folk music revival of the 1950s and 60s in America, which at times commercialized the politics of the Old and New Left,[49] Fahey articulated a professedly apolitical approach to the uses of folk music. He also bristled at the preference shown to

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[48] Brian Jones, "Finding the Avant-Garde in the Old-Time: John Cohen in the American Folk Revival," *American Music* 28.4 (2010): 427.

[49] Greil Marcus provides an example from the marketing of Harry Smith's anthology in the early 1960s:

> "...Irwin Silber of *Sing Out!* magazine took over the marketing of Folkways Records and replaced Smith's chosen art with a Ben Shahn Farm Security Administration photograph of a battered, starving farmer, effectively transforming Smith's alchemical allegory into Depression-style protest art. In the context of time, when folk music was linked to protest, specifically in terms of the civil rights movement and the commonly invoked national shame of Appalachian poverty and backwardness, with poverty understood as ennobling and the poor themselves often perceived as art statements, it was a smart commercial move." *Anthology of American Folk Music*, Smithsonian Folkways SW CD 40090, 1997, 6 compact discs, liner notes, 25.

commercial folk artists over an older, more traditional generation who had influenced the new generation in style and repertoire.[50] He titled a chapter of his autobiography *How Bluegrass Music Destroyed My Life* "Volk Festivals." He told of his terrible experiences at "volk" festivals and meeting "volklorists," who he distained for what he saw as pretenses of authenticity. He commented more than once "...I am no Volk."[51] Using the term "volk" was Fahey's way of calling attention to the idea of the "folk" as a construction of academics, going back to Herder. Fahey referenced here his distrust of blindly following movements and using cultural ideas to political ends. Given Fahey's disdain for the political aspects of the folk revival, it is fitting that he viewed Pete Seeger as his antithesis:

> Pete Seeger was one of the greatest five-string banjo players I ever heard. He was on a par with Uncle Dave Macon. But he counted his proficiency to be of no worth other than as accompaniment to his political and

[50] Fahey referenced an experience late at night during the 1973 Buffalo Folk Festival in which Steve Goodman, composer of "The City of New Orleans," sent a staff member to ask Roosevelt Sykes to switch places with him on the bill, so he could leave earlier. Sykes graciously agreed to it, but the request upset Fahey, who felt it was inconsiderate to ask a tired older man to stay later. Whether this incident happened exactly the way Fahey tells it—Fahey's memoir blends fact and fiction—this and his chapter on his relationship with Bukka White illustrate Fahey's identification with the older generation of folk and blues musicians. John Fahey, *How Bluegrass Music Destroyed My Life*, Chicago: Drag City Press, 2000, 147-149.

[51] Fahey, *How Bluegrass Music Destroyed My Life*, 187-188.

> togetherness songs. He didn't notice that many were listening to the banjo more than the words. False modesty.[52]

Comments like these make it easy to view Fahey as a pedant and polemicist, but this comment reveals Fahey's view on the relationship between aesthetic and politics in the revival. It annoyed Fahey that folk music's relevancy came from "revolutionary words" and not the artistry of the music—which had equal potential for change. Fahey despised what he saw as the self-righteousness of some folk performers and thought that most commercial folk music was "pretty bad, aesthetically speaking."[53] He was interested in music at an artistic level, not a socio-political one. Other artists shared his view. Jean Ritchie felt strongly against using her people's music for political purposes:

> I didn't like the fact that my ballads would be taken and just sung to make a point for the left wing people. I didn't think that was right. I thought music should be music. The songs that I was raised with were sort of sacred to me, and I didn't want to sing them through big fog horns.[54]

It is understandable that Ritchie, as an Appalachian person, would feel confused and even offended that people with no knowledge of Appalachian experience would take songs from her region and pin them on their own causes. Bob Dylan spoke of his alienation from the folk movement in the mid 1960s: "Whatever the

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[52] Ibid., 223.

[53] Ibid., 216.

[54] *Folk America*, "This Land Is Your Land," Episode 2, Produced by Mark Cooper, BBC Four, 2009.

counterculture was, I'd seen enough of it. I was sick of the way my lyrics had been extrapolated, their meanings subverted into polemics…"[55]

In addition to politics, Fahey abhorred the commercialism that inevitably played into the folk revival. He expressed his disgust over the incongruity of professed Marxist-types enjoying the profits reaped from their commercially successful music:

> The Volk do, on occasion, come up with wonderful creations. And waiting for them were the brokers and Madison Avenue Krell-like beings. The product changed from Marx to business and in some cases to greedy thought-control media mongers who heard the neat, previously unknown music, too. Rather than use it as a tool of political ideology, these guys used it as a tool of financial teleology.[56]

Irwin Silber expressed a similar sentiment in a 1963 issue of Sing Out!:

> Already, the lure of the fast-buck has attracted the gimmick slickers and the fly-by-night promoters who are moving in for the quick kill. With the halo of folk music protecting their efforts, the jackals are making their bid to take over—bending, twisting, distorting the living body of genuine creative expression to the hokum-folkum which can only turn out to be the same dish of muddy soup which we rejected in the first place.[57]

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[55] Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One* (New York: Simon & Schuster), 120.

[56] Fahey, *How Bluegrass Music Destroyed My Life*, 222-223.

[57] Cohen, *Rainbow Quest,* 214.

In his M.A. thesis, Fahey clearly expressed his feelings towards the relationship between aesthetics and politics in Charley Patton's music:

> Patton was an *entertainer*, not a social prophet in any sense. He had no profound message and was probably not very observant of the troubles of his own people. He was not a 'noble savage.' Least of all did he try to express the 'aspirations of a folk.' His lyrics are totally devoid of any protesting sentiments attacking the social or racial *status quo*.[58]

Fahey felt that pinning one's own interpretation of the social meaning of Patton's music devalued Patton as an artist and entertainer. Fahey did not like the idea that Patton's "message" was made more relevant by his ethnicity or social status—the music, he argued, transcended all that. Fahey's downplaying the role of race in understanding the blues was part reactionary polemic, but also a call to consider the blues as serious genre of art. Brian Jones made similar observations in his article on avant-garde aspects of the folk revival. Jones found that traditional banjoist and singer Roscoe Holcomb's approach to his music contradicted the stereotypes amongst revivalists of Appalachian music as personal expression. According to Jones, for Holcomb, "music was meant to serve a useful purpose, whether it be social, religious, or financial."[59]

Fahey employed a self-consciously academic approach to his work, sometimes for humorous effect, but also to distance himself from the idea of

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[58] Ibid., 29.

[59] Jones, "Finding the Avant-Garde in the Old-Time," 421.

authenticity and the "folk." Fahey's approach was admission that "authenticity" was unattainable—recognition that he was an outsider commenting on past tradition. "Primitivism" was already a term in use in the art world and a label created by academics, which Fahey used to describe his music. Fahey's quasi-academic approach to his music was in the same vein as Smith's *Anthology*. Greil Marcus claimed the *Anthology* was "disguised as a text book; it was an occult document disguised as an academic treatise on stylistic shifts within an archaic musicology."[60] Smith was also interested in the idea of the primitive as a source of hidden meaning. He was interested in patterns and connections between various art forms. A function of this quasi-academic approach was, as Petrusich wrote, to "reposition the collector, rather than the critic or scholar, as an architect of canons, an arbiter, a storyteller."[61] Brian Jones's definition of the avant-garde sensibility in the folk revival applies to both Smith and Fahey: "...they sought to set themselves apart from the mainstream, proud of their intellectual independence and integrity, while relying upon historical, artistic, and literary means to establish legitimacy."[62] At the same time, Fahey often self-deprecated his role in the revival, as though recognizing his inauthenticity somehow made him more authentic. In this way, Fahey's and Smith's works were subversive and fashioned their own alternative narratives by questioning the accepted method of canon-creation. Fahey wrote in his M.A.

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[60] Smith, *Anthology of American Folk Music*, liner notes, 7.

[61] Petrusich, *Do Not Sell at Any Price*, 141.

[62] Jones, "Finding the Avant-Garde in the Old-Time," 413.

thesis on Charley Patton, "It is a sad commentary on American scholars of folk music that between 1927 and 1962 the commercial recording industry did an infinitely better job of collecting, preserving, and making available to the public native American folksongs—especially black folksongs."[63] Alan Lomax's *List of American Folk Songs on Commercial Records* served as a guide for Smith and other record collectors. Lomax wrote in his introduction:

> American folk music, while certain folklore specialists have been mourning its decline, has been growing in new directions to compete with "thick" commercial music, and that it is today in its most "distorted" form in a healthier condition, roving the radio stations and recordings studios than it has been or ever will be in the notebooks of collectors.[64]

Many folklorists and song collectors had the notion that any kind of modern outside influence adulterated the purity of the "folk." Lomax wholeheartedly rejected this idea, recognizing that the folk tradition was, as it should be, ever-changing.

Fahey's aversion to associating himself with the mainstream folk revival stemmed from what he perceived as the disingenuousness of those who overtly politicized their work to hop on the bandwagon. Fahey called "underground," "folk," "hippie," and "folknik" "marketing terms."[65] At the same time, blues

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[63] Fahey, *Charley Patton*, 15.

[64] Alan Lomax, *List of American Folk Songs on Commercial Records*, (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1942), 1.

[65] Fahey, *How Bluegrass Music Destroyed My Life*, 222-224.

revivalists and record collectors could be equally viewed as disingenuousness for at times favoring blues artists that they perceived as rural, primitive, and mysterious. Fahey was acutely aware of and critical of this tendency:

> In order to be a great retired country blues singer participating in the, har, har, "revival" and simultaneously representing and interpreting the *Volk*-soul, you have to have at least one conviction for murder... Or you could be a murderer but escape prosecution... Finally if you couldn't achieve one or both of these it was OK if you *got* murdered..." [66]

As Elijah Wald pointed out in *Escaping the Delta*, a biography of Robert Johnson, murdered in 1938, the singer did not achieve popularity until the 1960s blues revival. His obscurity and untimely death added to the attraction. Fahey simultaneously participated in and criticized these tendencies:

> Most approaches to music are very romantic, idealistic, mystical almost. I have those feelings too, but I'm more the hard-headed scientist. ... I mean, all these guys had big romantic legends built up around them. I went down to try to get the facts. I wanted to de-romanticize wherever it was called for. The facts are much less romantic than the legends.[67]

Section III. "Who Is the Masked Marvel?"[68]: Creating John Fahey

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[66] Ibid., 222-226.

[67] Fahey, *Your Past Comes Back to Haunt You,* liner notes, 7.

[68] A reference to a Paramount Records promotional contest to guess Charley Patton's identity from listening to his recordings of "Mississippi Boweavil Blues"

In creating his persona and music, Fahey paradoxically attempted to assert his independence from tradition, while being firmly rooted in it. He also believed that he could sever himself from politics and the racial aspect of the blues, but constructed race as a performance and mask. Actions and ideas do not have to be overt to be politicized. The cover of the July 13, 1964 issue of *Newsweek* featured gun-toting police officers in Mississippi during the heat of the Civil Rights Movement. That same issue contained a short feature on three "young blues buffs," one of whom was Fahey, who had "rediscovered" Son House in a hospital. Fahey was met with suspicion by both blacks and whites while canvassing for 78s in black neighborhoods in Mississippi during such a volatile time. Fahey and his friends were not trying to register voters, but their work was daring and politically-charged in its own way. Recognizing black artists as worthy of attention was political. Harry Smith's *Anthology* did not make an overt political statement and was viewed foremost as an artistic and preservationist work, but when John Cohen asked Harry Smith about the artistic influence of the anthology, Smith replied, "I felt social changes would result from it. I'd been reading Plato's *Republic*. He's jabbering on about music, how you have to be careful about changing the music because it might upset or destroy the government."[69] In the early recording era, the racial identities of performers could be very obscure. Fahey wrote in his liner notes to the *Anthology* that the belief was commonplace amongst black performers he met in the South that

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and "Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues." Charley Patton. *"Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues": The Worlds of Charley Patton*, Revenant 212, 2001, 7 compact discs.

[69] Smith, *Anthology of American Folk Music Volume Four*, liner notes, 39.

Uncle Dave Macon was black.[70] Maybelle Carter, Frank Hutchison, and Dock Boggs were all strongly influenced by black musicians.[71] Fahey did not recognize color boundaries in his music and owes as much to the blues as he does to hillbilly music as to European concert music. Fahey is often associated with the blues, but he was also influenced greatly by white rural guitarists like Sam McGee. His autobiography, *How Bluegrass Music Destroyed My Life* (2001), described discovering bluegrass as a conversion experience. Bluegrass, like much American folk music, combined elements of African-American music with that of rural whites. Fahey wrote of Smith's choices for inclusion in the anthology:

> The White and Black folks found herein... listened to and drew from each other's music in a landscape of musical interchange nonexistent during this same period between any other traditions to be found under the rubric of 'American' music. Smith had an encyclopedic knowledge of 78s and a preternatural feel for the connections between them—across race and ethnic boundaries...[72]

Smith did not racially identify any performer on the *Anthology*, which was a significant departure since when their records were originally released, the performers were generally defined by the catalog they were in—"race" or "hillbilly." He was pleased that "it took years before anybody discovered that

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[70] Smith. *Anthology of American Folk Music*, liner notes, 12.

[71] Ibid., 45, 58.

[72] Ibid., 9.

Mississippi John Hurt wasn't a hillbilly."[73] In his 1991 acceptance speech for a National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences Chairman's Merit Award, he said, "I'm glad to say my dreams came true. I saw America changed through music."[74]

Even though Fahey repeatedly called into question the attainment of authenticity amongst folk revivalists, he practiced his own form of self-image creation. Elizabeth Cotten was one of Fahey's most important early influences. According to Ed Denson, Fahey listened to and learned from her at hoots in the Washington, D.C. area between 1954 and 1958.[75] Fahey also recorded a song on Fonotone titled "Libba's Rag," presumably in tribute to her. But after he gained some notoriety, Fahey seemed to downplay Cotten's influence on him, though he admitted that Cotten taught him to play in open G tuning. The greatest evidence of Cotten's influence is the similarity in sound, feeling, and repertoire between Fahey's early albums and Cotten's Folkways album *Negro Folk Songs and Tunes* (1958). Although Fahey claimed to have learned "Poor Boy Long Ways from Home" from Barbecue Bob's recording, his rendition more closely resembles Elizabeth Cotten's "Vastapol." On *The Dance of Death and Other Plantation Favorites*, Fahey records the same tune under the title "The Siege of Sevastopol." Perhaps Fahey felt that learning songs from a Barbecue Bob record somehow had more legitimacy that learning it from a woman in her sixties.

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[73] Ibid., 11.

[74] Petrusich, *Do Not Sell at Any Price,* 153.

[75] Fahey, *Your Past Comes Back to Haunt You,* liner notes, 43.

Fahey's identification with Barbecue Bob over Cotten shows his effort to create an association with "authentic" bluesmen. Fahey had also always made much of his friendship with Bukka White. White told Fahey that he knew Charley Patton, but Stephan Calt believed White was only telling Fahey what he wanted to hear.[76] Even though Fahey claimed the inability to be "authentic," he also wanted to be seen as a part of the genealogy of the blues. Fahey's academicizing of his work was a way to give it authority and highlighted his participation in tradition in the modernist sense—a self-conscious engagement with the past in the creation of something new. Jorge Luis Borges once wrote that "every writer creates his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future."[77] This echoes Eliot's argument in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in which the introduction of a new work inevitably changes the tradition. Creating his record label Takoma in 1959 was a way for Fahey to have complete control over his work and his image creation and kept him free from dependence on others.

Throughout Fahey's early recordings, he aligned himself with traditional folk and blues musicians. Posing as Blind Thomas or Blind Joe Death, Fahey's mimicry was part homage, part identification with the originators of the music he imitated, and partly an attempt to disrupt the idea of authenticity and racialized music. Fahey's late 1950s Fonotone recordings include straightforward renditions

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[76] Stephen Calt, *I'd Rather Be the Devil: Skip James and the Blues* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2008), 243.

[77] Jorge Luis Borges. *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, eds. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1962), 195.

of blues songs recorded in the 1920s and 30s such as a version of "Buck Dancer's Choice" most similar to Sam McGee's 1926 recording. He also recorded versions of Charley Patton's "Mississippi Boweavil Blues"--which Patton himself released under the pseudonym "The Masked Marvel"--and "Green River Blues" all complete with a gruff imitation of Charley Patton's voice. His early recordings also included original blues compositions that hint towards his future innovation.

One of the decidedly modernist aspects of Fahey's early albums was the frequent use of montage or sound collage and pastiche. Fahey's pieces are full of quotations from other works and styles of music. In one aspect, this is in the folk tradition, in which different words are put to familiar melodies or melodies changed slightly and made into different songs. But Fahey's pieces are in a more compositional style. "John Henry," from *Blind Joe Death* (1959) is similar to Mississippi John Hurt's "Spike Driver Blues." "Desperate Man Blues" reworks the folk song "John Hardy." *Death Chants, Breakdowns, and Military Waltzes* (1963) contained his first recorded version of "John Henry Variations," in which Fahey repeats and varies the familiar ballad of "John Henry," invoking the classical music convention of theme and variations. The recording is over five and a half minutes long, in which Fahey takes the familiar tune, retains the folk idiom, but elaborates and extends it. His playing style bears the direct influence of country blues guitarists such as Mississippi John Hurt with his steady alternating bass and simple melody line. Composers had long incorporated folk tunes into their compositions, but Fahey does it in an elaborated style of traditional country blues, extracting an orchestral sound from his guitar. "Dance of the Inhabitants of

the Palace of King Phillip XIV" is strangely titled, not suggesting that the piece is a Patton-esque slide-guitar piece. Fahey explained that some of his titles were inspired by opera: "I kept changing the title—originally it was 'Dance of the Inhabitants of the Invisible City of Bladensburg,' inspired by Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh.*"[78] There are three pieces on *Death Chants* whose titles Fahey took from 78 rpm-era songs--"When the Springtime Comes Again" by the Carter Family, "On the Beach at Waikiki" by the Waikiki Stone-Wall Boys, and "Take a Look at That Baby" by The Two Poor Boys.[79] But none of Fahey's so-titled songs bear any relation to the original tunes. Fahey's use of collage was a way of exploring his work's relationship with the past and the variety of source material he brought together—simultaneously tied to the past but using it to create something new.

The Voice of the Turtle (1968) is a prime example of many of the themes seen throughout Fahey's work—collage, a humorous quasi-academic tone, and situating himself in the genealogy of the blues. Fahey frequently downplayed the seriousness of his music with cryptic references or rambling parodies of academic writing. The lengthy liner notes were mostly nonsensical and have an old-fashioned, exaggerated academic tone:

> ...for inasmuch as, and to the extent to which the recordings which comprise this record comprise a well defined yet non-directive channel of

[78] "The Notes on the Songs: Death Chants, Breakdowns, and Military Waltzes," The International Fahey Committee, "The Fahey Files," Last modified February 2003, http://www.johnfahey.com/index1.html.

[79] Guerrieri, *The John Fahey Handbook Vol. 1*,, 247.

> Mr. Fahey's roots and the progression of his music for the inquisitive listener to satisfy his curiosity and for the casual listener to be entertained thereby, the inquisitive listener thus may have his curiosity satisfied and the casual listener may, in the same manner, as it were be entertained. And that, the former is exactly the point of this record: A history, chronicle and documentary recording—all in one—of Mr. Fahey's musical creations, and of what is, to the scholar, or the inquisitor, of more significance, Mr. Fahey's musical influences which led to his creations.[80]

The record does have a documentary feel and contains tracks from Fahey's past, including a Fonotone recording. The performers are listed for each track—many of them list Blind Joe Death and John Fahey accompanying each other. Blind Joe Death in this instance is not presented to be Fahey himself, but Fahey's mentor. "Bottleneck Blues" is listed as performed by Blind Joe Death and John Fahey, but is actually the 1927 recording by Sylvester Weaver and Walter Beasley.[81] *A Raga Called Pat Part III* is listed as performed by Monks, Fahey & Gong. According to Fahey scholar Claudio Guerrieri, the monks and gongs were from the album *Tibetan Ritual Music* (1967) and dubbed over Fahey's guitar playing. *The Voice of the Turtle* contains two songs that were on Volume 3 of the *Anthology of American Folk Music*—"Nine Pound Hammer" (on the *Anthology* as "Spike Driver Blues") and a humorous rendition and a rare vocal performance by

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[80] John Fahey, *The Voice of the Turtle*, Takoma LP C-1019 (stereo), 1968, liner notes.

[81] Guerrieri, *The John Fahey Handbook Vol. 1*, 363.

Fahey of "I Woke Up One Morning in May," which Fahey calls "Je Ne Me Suis Reveillais Matin Pas En May," which translates to "I Did Not Wake Up One Morning in May." Even though these tracks go back to 1962—and one was not even a Fahey recording—all the tracks flow naturally together. Most listeners would not realize that it was not actually Fahey playing "Bottleneck Blues."

In 1967, Fahey was signed to record two albums for Vanguard Records, the label that produced Joan Baez's records throughout the sixties along with other widely-appealing folk musicians. Fahey actually wanted his albums released on Vanguard's classical imprint, but Vanguard did not see him this way.[82] The cover of *Requia*, his first Vanguard release, was easily the most conventional cover in Fahey's entire catalog. The flowers in the foreground, which evoked the aesthetic of Judy Collin's *Wildflowers* from the same year, coupled with Fahey's seat on a rustic sawhorse in front of an unpainted building projected a simple and straightforward image, and Vanguard hoped for Fahey to play music that connected to the rural past suggested by this photograph. Vanguard carelessly inverted the photograph, giving Fahey the appearance of being a left-handed player and inverting the letters on his distinctive Bacon and Day guitar. According to Fahey's manager Denny Bruce, Vanguard asked Fahey to "record for Takoma 'experimental records,' but to try and make commercial recordings for Vanguard."[83] Some of the pieces on the album are in the

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[82] Lowenthal, *Dance of Death*, 69-70.

[83] Richie Unterberger, "Liner Notes for John Fahey's Of Rivers and Religion," Accessed February 2017, http://www.richieunterberger.com/ofrivers.html.

elaborated folk guitar style that had garnered him the record deal with Vanguard. But far from being a commercial album, as Fahey put it, he used it as a venue for his "first attempt at musique concrète,"[84] the use of sound as music as inspired by John Cage. "Requiem for Molly (Part 4)" took up most of side two of his album. Fahey's guitar sparsely accompanies random tape loops from a sound effects library. His selections were meant to memorialize his relationship with his former girlfriend Molly Greenbaum.[85] Fahey felt the need to write in his liner notes about this piece: "The sound effects reflect nothing political as does none of my music. This song is about Molly's psychological destruction... I have heard she has recovered a bit."[86] Fahey clearly wanted his music to be seen as part of an artistic movement, rather than a political one. Fahey's contract with Vanguard, which of course was not renewed, shows his utter disregard for the commercial pressure of the mainstream folk revival and his commitment to experimentation.

By 1970, Fahey, although not mainstream by any means, had achieved a level of notoriety. Takoma began to see appreciable financial success after their release of Leo Kottke's *6- and 12- String Guitar* in 1969. Fahey was signed for two albums on Reprise. There were no sound collages or atonal pieces on these albums, but included pieces accompanied by backing musicians playing Dixieland-style jazz. Perhaps Fahey was attempting to be more commercial, or

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[84] Pouncey, "Blood on the Frets."

[85] Guerrieri, *The John Fahey Handbook Vol. 1*,, 346.

[86] John Fahey, *Requia*, Vanguard LP VSD-79259 (stereo), 1967, liner notes.

perhaps he was simply taking advantage of the resources and budget of being on a major record label. Overall, both albums were in line with Fahey's previous work--*Of Rivers and Religion* contained a "Funeral Song for Mississippi John Hurt" and *After the Ball* included versions of Sylvester Weaver's "Smoketown Strut"—which Fahey calls "Bucktown Stomp"—, Reverend Gary Davis's "Candy Man," and a piece Fahey called "Hawaiian Two-Step" which closely resembles the 1929 recording of "Spanish Fandango" by John Dilleshaw and the String Marvel. The two albums are a continuation of Fahey's earlier style. The inclusion of accompanists was probably surprising to some listeners. Fahey said of the albums, "I don't understand why they got bad reviews. It's like every time I wanted to do something other than play guitar I got castigated."[87] In 1973, Fahey played at Carnegie Hall on the same bill as classical guitarist Laurindo Almeida and jazz guitarist Gabor Szabo.[88] Fahey had achieved what he had dreamed of—to be taken seriously as a concert artist working out of the tradition of American folk music, on a par with classical and jazz musicians.

Section IV. "Your Past Comes Back To Haunt You[89]:" An Uncomfortable Revival and a Lasting Legacy

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[87] Pouncey, "Blood on the Frets."

[88] Lowenthal, *Dance of Death,* 112.

[89] Fahey's comment to guitarist Glenn Jones on Dean Blackwood's desire to release Fahey's early Fonotone recordings. John Fahey, *Your Past Comes Back to Haunt You,* liner notes, 8.

Later in Fahey's career, he became more intent on escaping his past and more insistent on artistic experimentation, but still could not shake his earlier renown. His last work, *Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues: The Worlds of Charley Patton* (2001), served as homage not only to himself, but to the very artifacts that first inspired him.

Fahey's career, health, and personal life suffered beginning in the mid 1970s. During this time, he sold Takoma Records to Chrysalis. Fahey was never wealthy from his career, and in the early 1990s, Fahey lived in poverty in a homeless shelter and cheap motels, surviving by reselling classical records he found at thrift stores. Fahey's ex-wife believed that Fahey's living conditions were a part of his image-creation: "John did spend quite a bit of time creating his own myths, and I think maybe the Union Gospel Mission was part of that, the myth of John Fahey."[90] Fahey's legend grew and people buying his records assumed he was dead. This led to Fahey's rediscovery by music critic Bryon Coley, reminiscent of Fahey's rediscovery of Skip James in 1964—a parallel which, as his ex-wife suggested, was perhaps what Fahey wanted. A 1997 *New York Times* article, chronicled Fahey's resurgence:

> It is Mr. Fahey's moment as he rides back into view as an avant-garde father figure, whom the guitarist Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth has acknowledged as a 'secret influence.'
>
> Mr. Fahey's music is conceptually slippery: it belongs to no genre. Musicians within folk, neo-acoustic blues, New Age and now, strangely

[90] Ibid., 144.

> enough, post-everything avant-garde rock have claimed him as an inspiration. A couple of articles by the rock critic Byron Coley—a 1994 Spin magazine profile and an entry on Mr. Fahey's work in the recent Spin Alternative Record Guide—sparked new interest. Mr. Fahey began getting calls from record companies and musicians, and now he finds himself, to his amusement, the object of much attention.[91]

Fahey himself said, "In the current season, the only people who understand me and with whom I have anything in common are punks and alternatives and industrial and no wave and anti-folk, etc. ... My category is alternative, period. I object to another categorization."[92] As witness to Fahey's stubborn loyalty to his art and disregard for financial gain, he turned down a deal at the last minute to rerecord his Fonotone material with Sonic Youth and Beck for a six-figure sum.[93]

Fahey's 1990s albums were less sentimental than the earlier work that made his reputation. In the context of Fahey's career, his later albums are post-modern in their mood and use of bricolage, polystylism and randomness.[94] Fahey played electric guitar on *City of Refuge*, and the music was dark, slow, improvisational, and dissonant. Fahey commented that the album expressed his unhappy relationship with his parents.[95] The album was mostly panned by critics

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[91] Ben Ratliff, "A 60's Original with a New Life on the Fringe," *The New York Times*, Jan. 19, 1997.

[92] Lowenthal, *Dance of Death,* 146.

[93] Ibid., 146.

[94] Albright, *Modernism and Music*, 12-13.

[95] Lowenthal, *Dance of Death*, 159.

and fans, and Lowenthal suggested that Fahey was perhaps looking to shock fans, "being difficult for the sake of it."[96] But still, Fahey was continuing to reinvent himself and rework his previous musical experiences. Fahey did not rely on his previous work, but continued to remold the tradition he came from. Commenting on fans who would ask him to play old material, Fahey said, "I don't talk to them... If they keep it up, I tell them: 'Look, if you want to live in the past, go live in the past. But don't try and take us with you.'" Fahey rejected his earlier work, calling it "too sentimental."[97]

Despite the resurgence in interest in Fahey, his health and financial situation were in a tailspin. A surprise bequest from his estranged father upon his death allowed him to start Revenant Records. Lawyer and record collector Dean Blackwood took over management of Fahey and saved him from financial and personal ruin. According to Dean Blackwood, Fahey's Charley Patton box set on Revenant, *Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues: The Worlds of Charley Patton*, released just months after Fahey's death in 2001, was his "dream project for 40 years."[98] Just as the *Anthology* was best appreciated when considered as a whole, Fahey's Patton set was most significant considered as a whole—an art piece even. The set resembles a 78 rpm record album. The CDs themselves resemble 78 labels and are housed in reproduction 78 sleeves. The collection compiled all of the known Charley Patton recordings that Fahey and his fellow

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[96] Ibid., 160.

[97] Ibid., 162.

[98] Fahey, *Your Past Comes Back to Haunt You,* liner notes, 77.

record collectors had tirelessly searched for over the decades, as well as recordings of Patton's associates. The set also included a facsimile of Fahey's M.A. thesis, which was published in England in 1970. The set was a piece of nostalgia, but it was also the culmination of Fahey's research—an extension of his M.A. thesis, and as *Spin* magazine put it a "museum exhibition."[99] Revenant Records even presented the set as offering an alternative narrative in the history of the blues: "Historical revisionism has writ large the name of Robert Johnson in blues annals while according Charley Patton a comparative footnote."[100] The set was in the spirit of Fahey's past work—creating a new venue for traditional music and giving it new context.

Even though the Patton set did not contain original compositions by Fahey, it was a iteration of his earlier work in a different form. Fahey's work always referenced the archive of American blues and the artists and that had inspired him. With the box set, Fahey was able to take it a step further and pay homage to the very artifacts that had inspired him. Beyond reviving the past, Fahey imitated and extended American folk music and gave it new form in more than one sense.

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[99] Revenant Records. "Charley Patton: Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues." Accessed February 2017. http://revenantrecords.com/musics/products/screamin-and-hollerin-the-blues/.

[100] Ibid.

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